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New mercury rules too soft?

Utah officials, activists say Nevada action just a start

By [Judy Fahys](#)
[The Salt Lake Tribune](#)

Nearly a week after the Nevada Environmental Commission enacted new regulations on toxic mercury from gold mines in that state, Utah environmentalists and state regulators say the problem is far from resolved.

The new regulations do not include the tougher oversight and mandated mercury pollution cuts environmental organizations wanted. But, with no federal solution in sight, they welcomed the added mercury measurement and, eventually, controls that Nevada's new regulations are expected to bring.

Dianne Nielson, director of the Utah Department of Environmental Quality, sent a letter March 7 that generally supported Nevada's proposal and asked, as environmental groups did, for continuous emissions monitoring as that becomes feasible. But she did not call for the mercury cuts advocated by Salt Lake City Mayor Rocky Anderson in a March 5 letter to the commission.

"Our job is going to be to make sure Nevada does what it says it's going to do," said Nielson, adding that the new regulations should be implemented, monitoring should be stepped up and, eventually, new controls should be set on mercury from the mines.

"This isn't the end of the regulation," she said. "What we see is . . . that this is the right next step."

No one is sure exactly how much mercury might be drifting from the mines to Utah.

But gold-ore roasting is considered the likely suspect behind alarmingly high mercury concentrations in the Great Salt Lake.

Mercury becomes toxic methylmercury through a biochemical process. It builds up in the food chain and poses a risk to people who eat contaminated meat, especially

pregnant and nursing women and young children.

Too much methylmercury damages developing brains and can result in permanent neurological damage. Such high levels have been found in Utah that the state cautions against eating too much of three kinds of fish and warns against eating any of two duck species - an advisory unprecedented nationwide.

Joro Walker, an attorney representing 10 Utah advocacy groups that urged Nielson to weigh in on the Nevada regulations, said Monday the groups appreciated the DEQ director's letter and called the new regulations "a step in the right direction."

"We are grateful for what [Utah regulators] did do," she said.

"Was it adequate? No. But we hope they will do more in the future."

But Jeff Salt, director of the Great Salt Lakekeeper, said "The state probably fell very short of the public's expectations."

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